

Oakland officers reluctant to drive new patrol cars — possible fire defect

By Harry Harris
Tribune Staff Writer

Forty new patrol cruisers have been purchased for Oakland police but there are hints that some officers would rather walk their beats than ride the cars.

The reason for the hesitancy is that the cars are the same model 1980 Ford LTDs which caught fire earlier this year when the New Orleans Police Department began using them.

Bob Foster, president of the Oakland Police Officers Association, has monitored the problems that New Orleans had and says the OPOA's safety coordinator is working closely with the city to make sure the same things don't happen here.

Foster commented: "I would not recommend any member or any police officer anywhere use a piece of equipment that would endanger his life or his welfare and that includes vehicles.

"It's incumbent upon the employer to provide safe equipment. If these cars are not safe then I personally would not drive one.

"We will expect (the city) to make sure our vehicles are safe."

Gus Krinke, a detective in the New Orleans Police Department's public information

division, said their car fires occurred in a three-week period in late May and early June.

Four were under-the-hood fires and one was a small fire in the left front brake area. No one was injured but two of the fires caused heavy damage, he said. On June 14, all 103 Ford LTDs were taken out of service until the causes for the fires could be found.

He said that New Orleans city engineers and Ford engineers finally concluded there were no functional defects or problems caused by the installation of police equipment.

Three of the fires started from excess transmission fluid that spewed from loose dip stick caps and came in contact with hot exhaust systems, causing the fires.

Another fire was caused by a plastic shield placed over the disc brakes to prevent rock damage. It overheated when it rubbed against the disc rotor.

The fifth fire was traced to a speedometer cable which worked loose and brushed the car's catalytic converter system.

Since then, new maintenance procedures have been put into effect and the cars have been back on the street since the first of July with no further problems.

Krinke spoke highly of Ford model police cars which he said his department has always used.

"They've proven to be the most durable of police cars," he said. "They are able to take the 24 hours of punishment involved in police work."

Hayward police have had 17 of the cars on the street since June without any difficulty. Frank Fontana, auto equipment superintendent, said he is "comfortable" with the cars. But, he said, as an added precaution his mechanics are using transmission and power steering coolant to keep heat down.

Jerry Herrick, acting equipment services manager for the city of Oakland, said they are very aware of the problems and are working to make sure they do not occur here.

He pointed out the cars, which cost \$7,551 apiece, were "ordered way before any of these problems came up."

He said Melrose Ford of Oakland was the low bidder for the fleet, adding, "I think Ford is a perfectly good car and this is something they will work out."

But, he said, "Until I get some statement from Ford as to safety, I don't want them on the road and neither does the Police Department.

"They won't be put into

service until we get assurances from the dealer or the factory."

Charles DiBari, vice president of Melrose Ford, said there was no major problem with the car and hoped the story would not be blown out of proportion. He said he has received no official communications from Ford about the cars and no modifications have been made.

John Emmert, a spokesman for Ford's Dearborn, Mich., parts and service division, said the problems with the New Orleans' cars were "highly unusual" and that no similar occurrences were reported in any of the 16,000 police model cars Ford has manufactured in the past two years.

He said there was a possibility some modifications may be made concerning the plastic disc brake shield but there would be no modifications for the dip sticks.

"No car company can guarantee their cars are 100 per cent safe," he said. "But we have come to the conclusion that in New Orleans there were maintenance problems. We are working with them now on their maintenance procedures to try and prevent similar things from happening."